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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000812

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SUBJECT: SMALL TOWN BANGLADESH PREPARES FOR ELECTIONS: THE
VIEW FROM DUPCHANCHIA

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1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Pre-election excitement in palpable in Dupchanchia, one of the nine Bangladeshi municipalities holding elections August 4. Located in the northwest district of Rangpur, Dupchanchia has 13,000 inhabitants. The voters are focused on local issue and personalities, and the political machinations in Dhaka seem far away and largely irrelevant. A visit to Dupchanchia confirmed Bangladeshis are excited about the upcoming municipal elections and care more about the candidate than the party. End Summary.

Dupchanchia Voters Upbeat

¶2. (U) Crowded onto three wooden benches clustered around a small table in an overcrowded tea stall, a group of fifteen eager voters told us they closely follow the campaigns, explaining that the real negotiations and bidding for votes would begin two to three days before the elections. Our interlocutors said threats by major parties in Dhaka to boycott the elections would not affect voter turnout or election outcome in Dupchanchia. They confirmed what we have heard elsewhere, namely that candidate party affiliation matters little in this election because voters are looking at the person not the party.

Candidates Optimistic

¶3. (U) Candidates were uniformly optimistic about their electoral chances. One mayoral candidate is in jail, and his wife is campaigning on his behalf. A key element of her campaign has been that authorities filed a false case against him for political reasons, an approach that has garnered voter sympathy, she claims. Campaigns dominate the town's activities. Black and white posters hang from the awnings of local businesses and feature candidate photos and personal identification symbols such as a pineapple, mango, chair, or airplane. The pictorial symbols are particularly important as tools to identify candidates for the 59% of the population that is illiterate in Bangladesh.

Media Self-Censorship?

¶4. (C) Journalists reported exercising increased self censorship to avoid potential problems. More specifically, they alleged military intervention and pressure, including daily phone calls to suggest appropriate content and requests to highlight military and Caretaker Government accomplishments in articles.

An NGO Viewpoint

15. (C) A representative from an internationally-funded NGO engaged in voter registration as well as election monitoring criticized the expanded role of the military⁸ under a state of emergency. While candidate selection was fair, he predicted reduced voter turnout as a result of the "fear factor" associated with the military's involvement in the process. He announced that the Government of Bangladesh had endorsed the NGO's idea to create anti-violence task forces for the national parliamentary elections in December. Each task force would include leaders of local religious and social groups who would respond to confrontations on election day in an attempt to diffuse tensions. He believes Bangladeshis remain skeptical of military intentions and accused the military of exceeding its mandate. Note: In fact, the military's role (deployment to provide additional security in support of civil authority as needed) has been the standard for past elections.

Comment

16. (C) Dupchanchia provides a glimpse of election preparations in small town Bangladesh. Campaigning appears to be taking place with minimal restrictions. Dhaka politics and calls for boycotts do not resonate in Dupchanchia where the desire to vote is strong. Bangladesh is watching the August 4 elections as a dry run for the national parliamentary elections, particularly for the new voter list.

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In Dupchanchia, you cannot miss the fact that elections are taking place soon. It is a place where excitement, hope and great expectations abound in anticipation of August 4.
Pasi